

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
ON THE ELECTION IN IRAQ

Rose Garden

3:09 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon, everybody. Today, the people of Iraq went to the polls to choose their leaders in Iraq's second national election. By any measure, this was an important milestone in Iraqi history. Dozens of parties and coalitions fielded thousands of parliamentary candidates, men and women. Ballots were cast at some 50,000 voting booths. And in a strong turnout, millions of Iraqis exercised their right to vote, with enthusiasm and optimism.

Today's voting makes it clear that the future of Iraq belongs to the people of Iraq. The election was organized and administered by Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, with critical support from the United Nations. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis served as poll station workers and as observers.

As expected, there were some incidents of violence, as al Qaeda in Iraq and other extremists tried to disrupt Iraq's progress by murdering innocent Iraqis who were exercising their democratic rights. But overall, the level of security and the prevention of destabilizing attacks speaks to the growing capability and professionalism of Iraqi Security Forces, which took the lead in providing protection at the polls.

I also want to express my admiration for the thousands of Americans on the ground in Iraq -- for our civilians and our men and women in uniform who continue to support our Iraqi partners. This election is also a tribute to all who have served and sacrificed in Iraq over the last seven years, including many who have given their lives.

We are mindful, however, that today's voting is the beginning and not the end of a long electoral and constitutional process. The ballots must be counted. Complaints must be heard, and Iraq -- with the support of the United Nations -- has a process in place to investigate and adjudicate any allegations of fraud. A parliament must be seated, leaders must be chosen, and a new government must be formed. All of these important steps will take time -- not weeks, but months.

In this process, the United States does not support particular candidates or coalitions. We support the right of the Iraqi people to choose their own leaders. And I commend the Iraqi

government for putting plans into place to ensure security and basic services for the Iraqi people during this time of transition.

We know that there will be very difficult days ahead in Iraq -- there will probably be more violence. But like any sovereign, independent nation, Iraq must be free to chart its own course. No one should seek to influence, exploit, or disrupt this period of transition. Now is the time for every neighbor and nation to respect Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

A new Iraqi government will face important decisions about Iraq's future. But as today's voting demonstrates, the Iraq people want disagreements to be debated and decided through a political process that provides security and prosperity for all Iraqis.

And as they go forward, the Iraqi people must know that the United States will fulfill its obligations. We will continue with the responsible removal of United States forces from Iraq. Indeed, for the first time in years, there are no -- now fewer than 100,000 American troops serving in Iraq. By the end of August, our combat mission will end. As I said last year when I announced our new strategy in Iraq, we will continue to advise and assist Iraqi Security Forces, carry out targeted counterterrorism operations with our Iraqi partners, and protect our forces and civilians. And by the end of next year, all U.S. troops will be out of Iraq.

In the weeks and months ahead, the United States will continue to work closely with the Iraqi people as we expand our broad-based partnership based on mutual interest and mutual respect. And in that effort, I'm pleased that Vice President Biden will continue to play a leading role.

On behalf of the American people, I congratulate the Iraqi people on their courage throughout this historic election. Today, in the face of violence from those who would only destroy, Iraqis took a step forward in the hard work of building up their country. The United States will continue to help them in that effort as we responsibly end this war, and support the Iraqi people as they take control of their future.

Thanks very much.